

theory is more than a mere reflection of its original historical context. The great innovators of sociological theory were inspired, creative thinkers responding to their own times and situations to produce original ideas of lasting, general significance. They are not just historically limited figures in an evolving tradition, but survive as still significant participants in a continuing discussion about the driving forces in human society and the widening repercussions of social change.

Each point of view which I have tried to explore in the following chapters is presented as mainly the conception of one major writer rather than in more formally abstract terms or as the common ground of a school of thought. This is, therefore, neither a detailed history of all the varied contributions to the sociological tradition nor a comprehensive review of every topic of sociological concern and inquiry. Admittedly, this procedure disguises the diversity of emphasis and shades of academic interpretation amongst those who identify themselves as critics or exponents of any given perspective. My aim, however, has been to try to present them relatively free of scholarly quibble and therefore in a way which is more accessible to the new student (whether of sociology, politics, development studies, cultural studies or social policy) and, at the same time, to show the basic ideas as essentially the work of writers engaged in lively and still relevant exploration of issues which still matter to us all. Social theory has this further connection with social change – one, however, that we must each make for ourselves. In so far as we are not just helpless victims but are active participants in the process, the better understanding of the complexities of social change, which this rich endowment of theoretical argument and commentary can provide, may help us to adapt more effectively where we have to and, where we can, to shape its outcomes with greater insight and to more humane ends.

# 1

## **Introduction: Dimensions of the Debate**

Change is everywhere. The births, marriages and deaths of friends and relatives, the crises of schooling or the stages of a career, weave the fabric of our individual life-worlds. In the wider world we move in too, there are new ideas to assimilate, new procedures, new technologies, fresh opportunities to grasp or ignore. And even the apparent absence of change, in the community, the family or the organization where we work, is subject to development and transformation as experience accumulates; the newness of relationships turns into familiarity and the innovative becomes the taken for granted. It is true that beneath the constant activity of daily events and the cyclical changes of a lifetime or a career lie all the enduring ties of kinship and nationality, the persistent inequalities of fortune and power, and the remorseless exigencies of market forces. Deeper still, however, there are currents reshaping and rearranging even these abiding coordinates of the social map. The comings and goings of everyday life, that is to say, take place within a framework of basic assumptions, settled relationships, familiar patterns of behaviour and an established division of resources. But it is less immovable than it looks. The framework itself may be subject to alteration, adaptation, slow erosion or radical upheaval. It was the causes and consequences of changes at that level, of what we can call structural change, that concerned the major social theorists whose work we shall consider in this book – and that, indeed, greatly fuelled the impetus driving the development of sociology as a discipline.

## Social change and social theory

The industrialization, political revolutions, civil changes, commercial development, population growth and, not least, the artistic and intellectual creativity of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries gave rise to modern social theory. Thinkers sought to apply to society the scientific temper of natural history and so explain the rapidly and visibly changing world around them. This did not lead, however, to a consensus of view about the nature of the historical processes at work or about where they were leading us all. Some welcomed what they saw, some were pessimists; some saw great impersonal forces unfolding in the course of history, some saw individual men acting rationally in the light of their moral understanding; some thought the new world emerging was utterly unlike anything that had gone before, some thought new styles merely served to disguise the same harsh old realities. Little has changed when we look at sociology today. Social change and its consequences remain key themes for contemporary social theory. In fact, I'd argue that other issues – the problem of social order, for example, the relationship of agency and structure and of the global and the local, or the social dimensions of identity – while important in themselves, can be seen as subsidiary to this theme of social change.

This book therefore is about both sociology and change. In looking at what has been said about structural change and what kinds of repercussions it has upon the lives of ordinary people or the fate of nations, at the same time we shall have to make some appraisal of the strengths and weaknesses, the plausible and implausible features of these diverse contributions to the debate. Debate can sharpen our understanding of the different strands of a complex subject. The arguments we shall examine in the following chapters may not give all the answers we might like, but I hope they will improve the quality of the questions we can ask about society: how social change comes about, what its effects are, and where it is leading us.

The various theoretical perspectives are presented here in a broadly chronological sequence, starting with Adam Smith in the eighteenth century and ending with the postmodernist theories of the late twentieth. This has the advantage of revealing how some later theorists have sometimes drawn upon and, more rarely, taken further ideas first advanced by earlier writers. I have been concerned to give credit where credit is due, but this broadly chronological approach also allows us to see how far

ideas can be adapted in different contexts or how far there may be further implications to an argument, which a writer may not have made explicit.

This is not the principal rationale for ordering the discussion in this way, however. It is also intended to represent the logical structure of the debate about social change. Thus Chapters 2, 3 and 4 look at pioneering theoretical work which established some of the basic concepts necessary for the analysis of social change. In Chapter 2 we can identify a specifically sociological level of analysis, before the term itself had been coined, in Adam Smith's work on the division of labour in society and the social and cultural, economic and political consequences of the market. Smith draws our attention to the emergent and systematic effects, larger but unforeseen, arising out of people's purposive activities, but independent of their intentions. Sociological theory, in contrast with, say, metaphysical, psychological or theological explanations, might be defined by this concern with the coherent, but unintended consequences of human actions. The evolutionary theories discussed in Chapter 3 represent a further step in the analysis of social change. They suggest that change can be seen as a progressive, linear series of stages which can be ordered as part of an evolutionary sequence. The dynamics of the transition from one stage to the next is the focus of Karl Marx's theory of revolutionary change discussed in Chapter 4. Influential for many reasons and in countless ways, a major part of the importance of Marx's theory is his analysis of how each stage grows out of, and is shaped by, the contradictory character of the one before. There are, however, counter-currents in the theoretical discussion of social change and the following three chapters, 5, 6 and 7, deal with some of these. In contrast with the generally optimistic theorists of evolutionary progress, there is also a strong tradition of criticism pointing out, on the one hand, the damaging costs of change and, on the other, the superficiality of ideas of progress while the brutal realities of power and domination persist. Chapter 5 discusses early and profoundly influential statements of these positions developed by Tönnies and Pareto.

The question of what are the generators and what the outcomes of social change remains at the heart of what has become a long-standing division in sociological theory and the chapters on Weber and Durkheim set out their groundbreaking attempts to

elaborate the two sides of this debate. While Weber argued that ideas and values are crucial in shaping human action and can thereby bring about change, in Durkheim's view, changing ideas and values are themselves the product of social change.

The next two chapters, 8 and 9, on systems theories and theories of modernity and postmodernity, show that this concern with cultural factors as cause or consequence continued in the dominant theories of the later twentieth century. A number of powerful theories using systems models, however, focus particularly on the interconnectedness of all change in maintaining the homeostasis of successful, that is, surviving, social systems. Nevertheless, the main theme in discussions of the economically developed world is the critique of contemporary culture. Theories of modernity, that is, of the shaping and continuing development of the advanced industrial countries, have been preoccupied with what have been perceived as crises of political legitimacy and personal identity. With postmodernist theory, the reflexive element in cultural critique – the argument that theorists too are but creatures of their times and circumstances – has come to challenge the possibility of theory itself and in a concluding chapter, we must confront the question of what, if anything, can follow the postmodern.

### Key issues for theory

The score or so of theories of social change reviewed here are diverse and incompatible. They do not converge towards a happy synthesis. Those which have proved most stimulating, either to those who have found them persuasive, or to those who have been provoked into criticism and attempts to confute them, have started from often radically different assumptions. Apart from their different insights and idiosyncrasies, however, there are a number of generic questions that they all confront, issues about which each of them has necessarily had to adopt a position. These not only define their different starting points, but provide a comparative understanding of why they have proffered such different interpretations. Amongst all the other similarities and differences, affinities and divergences, there are six dimensions which distinguish the distinctive approach of each of these theories. Two concern the nature and character of structural

change; two concern the character of social phenomena in general; and two address issues concerning what sort of knowledge is possible and what sort of statements about the social world can therefore be regarded as acceptable. (These questions are *epistemological* in character.)

There are, of course, many more than six issues which might distinguish one theoretical argument from another, but I would argue that the others are much less fundamental to the architecture of the theories which result and, some at least, are merely special cases or corollaries of the principal half dozen.

### Six key issues for theories of change

- (a) The character of change
  1. Change is Endogenous vs. Exogenous.
  2. Change is Inevitable vs. Contingent. (e.g. The idea of progress vs. the rejection of metanarratives.)
- (b) The character of the social
  3. Sociological Realism (Structure) vs. Methodological Individualism (Agency).
  4. Materialism vs. Idealism.
- (c) The character of explanation
  5. Possible Objectivity (Science) vs. Inescapable Commitment (Ideology).
  6. Rationalism vs. Empiricism.

Let us look at each of these positions in more detail:

#### 1. Endogenous vs. exogenous change

The first issue for theories of change is where to look for its causes. Is change primarily *endogenous* – that is, generated within the social system itself by the cultural and structural processes at work within it – or is it mainly *exogenous*, that is, the result of external factors intruding so as to destabilize an existing situation? You might think the obvious answer would be to say that it is sometimes the one and sometimes the other. But, as we shall see, theorists have mostly tended to be either interested only in those changes which were primarily exogenous or, conversely, have focused almost entirely on endogenous change.

The reason for these contrary views is that they mostly reflect a more profound disagreement about the predominance of conflict or consensus in human affairs. This difference of perspective has long predated modern sociological theorizing. Without going all the way back to classical Greece, we can find the basic opposition in the views of philosophers such as Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679) in the seventeenth century and Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778) in the eighteenth. Hobbes held that the natural condition of mankind is a war of all against all. Society exists to superimpose some degree of order on us and without the discipline maintained by the power of the state, the life of man would indeed be 'solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short' (1968, p. 186). Modern versions of this view, that life is naturally a competitive struggle for dominance, appear in neo-Darwinian theory, which is sometimes interpreted by biological scientists as having sociological implications (Wilson, 1975; Dawkins, 1976). The view of social relations as naturally harmonious and the nature of mankind as self-reliant, peaceable and cooperative, but enslaved and corrupted by society was expressed notably by Rousseau in *The Social Contract*, which had a powerful influence on those intellectuals who helped to make the French Revolution of 1789. Of course, consensus theorists are aware of wars and persecutions and the many confrontations of life, but they view them as unnecessary and avoidable. Similarly, conflict theorists are not blind to the collaborative achievements of mankind, but view conflict as an 'endemic but intermittent feature of collective action' (Collins, 1975).

Marxists have tended to regard society as a matter of the inevitably conflicting interests of lord and peasant, capitalist and worker, but other socialists like the followers of Fourier (1772–1837), or anarchists like Peter Kropotkin (1842–1921), have argued that class struggle is a historical aberration which can be replaced by a return to a society of mutual aid. Equally, some politically conservative thinkers from Machiavelli (1469–1527) or in twentieth-century sociology, Vilfredo Pareto (whose work we will look at in Chapter 5), have stressed the need for hierarchy and the concentration of power in order to contain the irreducibly conflicting interests of the more and the less privileged. But others, of a less reactionary but still conservative inclination, have argued for the complementarity of interests within society's division of labour, the idea of mutual obligation

between the ranks of society and the integrating functions of hierarchy. The latter idea has been developed by René Dumont in his discussion of the Indian caste system as explaining the long endurance of traditional Hindu society over centuries of political upheaval (Dumont, 1972). Consensus and conflict orientated theories, then, are associated with political points of view, but not in the simple way that is sometimes suggested.

As for social change, conflict theorists regard the momentary equilibrium which may be attained in a society at any given period as essentially precarious. The potential for endogenous change is always there in the struggle to reallocate the distribution of social advantage. Consensus theorists are likely to see change as exogenous, originating as an adaptation to culture contact, invasion or changes in the economic environment. The common interests of the members of the group, or the component elements of the wider society, then need to adjust in the light of the changing circumstances. In this way change is, on the whole, regarded as a reaction to events elsewhere.

## 2. Inevitable vs. contingent change

Is there a direction to history? In all the apparent contingencies and upheavals evident in the historical record, can we see the unfolding of some larger pattern? There are those who see human history, like other natural processes, as governed by laws of development which are accessible to scientific discovery. Most nineteenth-century sociology reflects this preoccupation under the two powerful influences of Hegelian and Darwinian ideas – Hegel's theory of the progress of the human spirit towards the final full realization of positive freedom through reason had widespread influence upon Marx's dialectical theory of history, as we shall see in Chapter 4. A recent manifestation has been Fukuyama's argument that history has now come to an end (Fukuyama, 1991). The idea of progress in the work of St Simon (in the 1820s, and the more systematic theories of Comte (1798–1857) in France and Herbert Spencer (1820–1903) in England (both discussed in Chapter 3), reinforced the popular impact of the Darwinian theory of the evolution of animal species in a progressive chain of evolution, from the protozoa right up to the Victorian man of letters (Burrow, 1966; Bowler, 1983). The laws of historical motion may be linear, through a progressive succession of stages, or cyclical, as the historian Toynbee (1961)

and the philosopher Spengler (1918) argued.

Other theorists, however, have rejected both linear progress and historical cycle. To borrow some pre-sociological rhetoric, their view of history is of 'a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing'. In the eighteenth century Montesquieu (1689–1755), reflecting on the diversity of human societies, how they flourish, how they decay, concluded that there was no pattern to the process. More recently, Karl Popper (1902–1996) attacked the belief in an underlying and inevitable direction to historical evolution, what he called historicism, especially as exemplified in the theories of Marxism and Hegelianism. The main thrust of his study, *The Poverty of Historicism* (1957), was that there is a logical flaw in claiming to explain the past and the present in terms of the destination towards which it is leading, such as analysing the dynamics of capitalist society in terms of its inevitable revolutionary overthrow. He argued that whatever we can say about the future, at best uncertain, can only come from our knowledge of the past and present. Therefore, to explain the past teleologically, that is, in terms of its contribution to the realization of what still remains, the future is an obvious case of entirely circular reasoning. In other words, it doesn't explain anything at all.

In recent times Krishnan Kumar has again emphasized the unpredictability of change, of discontinuity in history (Kumar, 1978). He has also drawn attention (1995) to the widespread loss in recent years of any belief in what certain theorists, among them Lyotard and Baudrillard, describe as the 'metanarratives' of history (1995; Lyotard, 1984; Baudrillard, 1976). By metanarratives we mean the basic underlying assumptions of historical writings, such as the belief in progress or the increasing rationalization of the world, or perhaps the succession of historical eras leading ultimately to the replacement of capitalism by socialism. Of course, the rejection of historical inevitability, of metanarratives or historicism, need not make historians redundant or entail abandoning all attempts to understand the processes of historical change. But we may have to recognize that the trends we tentatively discern, the sequences we believe we can trace, the configurations of apparently related events do not represent the discovery of the secret pattern of history.

### 3. Methodological individualism vs. sociological realism

This is a very familiar paradox masked in possibly rather daunting sociological terminology. Ordinary common-sense thinking has a proverbial capacity for accommodating apparently quite contradictory things: for example, too many cooks spoil the broth, but many hands make light work. Sociologists theorizing in a more systematic and rigorous way have tended to find it harder to integrate two apparently contradictory lines of thought. The first of these asserts that, for all the routine and ritual, the rankings and regalia, all the authority, all the money, all the ceremony and rules, what we call society is only a facade behind which are people much alike in their wit and strength, their weaknesses and hopes. There is no such thing as 'society', it is only an abstraction, something that exists solely in our continued belief in the conventions and the day-to-day practices through which we relate to one another. These are not facts of nature like the laws of chemistry; they are neither inevitable nor necessary. Life, in essence, is what we make it.

This form of individualism implies that social scientific analysis must begin with what is intelligible at the level of individual experience. Its approach, described by Popper (1945) as *methodological individualism*, is characterized by a commitment to what has meaning for those directly involved, and is generally associated with the work of Max Weber, whom I shall discuss in Chapter 6. It has mainly been influential, however, in the work of writers like the interactionists, followers of George Herbert Mead (1863–1931); the phenomenologists since Alfred Schutz (1899–1959); and those generally concerned with face-to-face interactions, like Erving Goffman (1922–1982), who have had little or nothing to say about social change.

On the other hand, common sense also tells us that we are only what society has made us. We are the creatures of our era, of our class, our culture, our gender or place. 'What can you expect of anyone with such a background?' It is society that makes us what we are; French speakers, Martiniquaises, Catholics or whatever. What choice we have is restricted, and the views and preferences we have are only those we were brought up to have, or have since learned to have. On this view it is society that is real, and our analysis therefore must begin at the level of the social whole. This is the view labelled *Sociological Realism*. The perspectives of Marx and Durkheim, and of the structural

functionalists like Talcott Parsons, are all alike in this respect, in that their analyses begin with the social system and individual actions are to be understood only within that wider context.

At a common-sense level, both views seem plausible enough, at one time or another. For social theorists however, with their self-imposed obligation of consistency, they present an unavoidable dilemma. The debate about the reconciliation of these two approaches continues very actively in terms of the relationship between *agency* and *structure* or 'the individual and society', and various arguments that there isn't really a gap between them at all. For some writers (Scottford Archer, 1988; Giddens, 1984; Layder, 1994; Scott, 1995), this is the central issue for present-day sociological theory.

#### 4. Materialism vs. idealism

The debate between materialist and idealist theorists has very long philosophical roots and only some aspects of the controversy figure directly within social theory. Materialist sociological theories are those that argue we must begin with the conflicts and collaborations of men and women who work and fight and procreate in order to survive. Everything else is essentially epiphenomenal, that is to say a matter of rationalization, justification, window-dressing. Idealist sociological theories begin with the premiss that social interaction is essentially meaningful. We behave as we do because we interpret our situation in a particular way. So the first things we need to understand will always be the ideas, the rules and assumptions which guide people's behaviour. Thus, as materialists, we might stress the needs, desires, opportunities and resources that determine our behaviour in the tangle world of flesh and blood people at large in a material environment. On the other hand, as idealists, we may want to focus on the phenomenological context. That is to say, you may take the view that the material world is effectively inert until we give it meaning. A piece of rock can be an element in an admired landscape, a potential sculpture, an obstacle to travel, building stone, mineral ore, protected habitat for rare lichens, cover for a marksman; any or several of these at once. But it is only when we attribute meaning to the world that it acts upon us or we upon it. And that goes for the world of our fellow human being too. If you have ever fallen over a piece of furniture you didn't realize was in the

way, the materialist view would seem to have some strong arguments on its side. However, in sociological matters the question is far from clear-cut. Six people in a room could be there for all sorts of reasons. They constitute a committee because they are designated as such and act as they believe they accordingly should. If they turn you down for the job or approve your application for a grant, they can have a real and material impact on your prospects, even though the committee exists, in some sense, only because the relevant people believe it to exist. Its rules and its powers are not imaginary, but you can only bump into them metaphorically. This sort of idealist perspective in social theory develops the view that cultural factors; values, meanings and beliefs, are what make the world intelligible and are ultimately what shape human action. Functionalists like Kingsley Davis (1948, 1959), Edward Shils (1981) or Robert Nisbet (1969), as well as the interactionists like G. H. Mead (1934) and Herbert Blumer (1969), or Alfred Schutz (1972) and the phenomenologists have, in their different ways, developed their arguments within this general perspective.

In contrast, materialists have stressed the determination of social development by the practical necessities of procuring a subsistence. For most versions of Marxist thought, and for many non-Marxist materialists, how people gain a livelihood has been the central issue in social history. Marxists have generally emphasized the importance of who owns or otherwise controls the means of subsistence in a society, that is, the land and the commercial and industrial infrastructure. Some have emphasized technological developments (Gordon-Childe, 1958), as have non-Marxists like St Simon, who stressed the importance of industrial technology, Aron (1964), or Fernand Braudel (1976) who has shown the profound and far-reaching effects of growing trade and commerce in medieval and Early Modern Europe and Asia. The American geographer Ellsworth Huntington (1945), in the 1940s revived ideas first outlined by Montesquieu 200 years earlier about the critical importance of soil and climate on social development. More recently, Leonard Dudley (1991) has argued that historical change can be explained in general terms as a result of major developments in the delivery of information: the invention of writing, printing, the mass media and information technology; and in the delivery of violence: the invention of metal weapons, artillery, steam transport and heavy

cavalry (including tanks). These have transformed the scale and effectiveness of the state in controlling larger and larger populations. All these writers were materialists in the sense we are using the term here.

Although they are quite distinct issues, there tends to be a congruence between writers' views on this question of materialism and idealism and their sociological realism or methodological individualism. On the whole, most materialists have been sociological realists, while the majority of methodological individualists have stressed the importance of ideal factors in their theory. The notable exceptions have been very influential, however. Hegel's philosophy of history (G. W. F. Hegel, 1770-1831) is concerned with the evolution of whole societies through the progressive transformations of the spirit of the age. On the other hand, materialist methodological individualists have been less concerned with questions of social change. Probably the best examples of this type of theorizing in sociology are those who have been strongly influenced by the psychological theory of Behaviourism first developed by J. B. Watson (1878-1958), and subsequently evolved almost into an academic orthodoxy in the 1950s and 1960s by B. F. Skinner (1904-1990) and his followers. This approach, which regarded only observable behaviour as relevant to scientific inquiry and all subjective experience as conjectural and not to be relied on, had a particular influence in the 1960s on what was described as Exchange Theory, but it is of only marginal relevance here (Homans, 1961; Blau, 1964).

##### 5. Objectivity vs. commitment

This, the first of the two epistemological issues we identified in our six basic positions, concerns whether objective knowledge of the social world is possible. In its strong form, this debate is about whether, on the one hand, sociology can be regarded as a science or whether, on the other, it is impossible to avoid being ideological whenever we say anything about society.

Science aspires to be a neutral body of objective truth that is equally true for everybody regardless of their wishes, motives or the benefits such knowledge might give or deny them. It is true that scientists sometimes get things wrong and have to revise their opinions, but that is precisely what the system of scientific thought and procedure is about: to test our views of the world

and to provide for their correction when we discover something new or find errors in what we thought before. By ideology, we mean a set of beliefs organized in such a way as to justify the best interests of the group who hold to them. Thus the view that all change is invariably for the worse makes good sense as part of the ideology of those who benefit most from the present order of things. The feeling that any change is better than none is perfectly intelligible as part of the ideology of those with nothing to lose.

Those who believe that sociology could never be an objective science argue that ideological thinking is unavoidable. We cannot help but see the world from our own point of view, however much we may try to sympathize with others. It is a problem of values rather than facts. Facts do not speak for themselves. The meaning they have for us is coloured by the emotional, moral or political commitments which make the framework of our understanding. These values are shaped by our socialization into a culture, a class position, a religious community, a gender role. It is not possible to step back from society for an objective view. We are inextricably part of it, permeated by it through our loyalties and prejudices, our livelihood and our sense of personal identity. How can we be dispassionate about what we are so intimately involved with? Isn't a study of society necessarily going to be biased by our own allegiances and material interests? Isn't the attempt to be scientific about what most people are irrevocably committed about itself an expression of values?

In a well-known article first published in 1970, but often reprinted, Alan Dawe argued that there were two sociologies, namely, one ostensibly scientific but concerned with the problems of order and control in society and therefore ideologically conservative; and the radical, especially Marxist, sociology politically committed to liberation from prevailing social forms, especially those characteristic of capitalist society (Dawe, 1970). Thus one sociology is, in fact, no more 'scientifically' neutral than the other. Those who claim to be 'objective' are merely making a debating point.

This point of view has been criticized for its oversimplification and for the relativism that follows from it (see Ryan, 1970; Peel, 1978; Flew, 1985). Martin Hammersley has more recently made similar criticisms of those feminist arguments which propose that all thought is necessarily 'gendered' (1992). Basically, if all



sociology is ideological, then there could be no common understanding between those whose interests divided them, between revolutionary proletariat and bourgeoisie, between men and women. If we exclude the possibility of a common understanding, then, except when exhorting those who already agree with us, all argument and discussion is really a waste of breath or paper. If what Dawe claims is true, not only would it be impossible to convince anyone who disagreed, but his own argument is relativized. That is to say, it is only 'true' because it seems to be so from his point of view. It cannot be equally true for anyone who has a different opinion because if it were *really* true for all of us regardless, then objectivity *is* possible and his argument falls down. In other words, if he convinces me, it means his argument is false. Such are the trials and absurdities of the relativist position.

An absolute faith in the truth of one's own convictions is not the only alternative to ideological relativism. Instead we may argue that ideas about the social world are not wholly determined by our circumstances and that it is possible to change our minds in the light of experience and observation. Thus objectivity can be constructed in the course of our investigations. It is a way of dealing with evidence by empirical inquiry and logical criticism. Even if we cannot attain the precision and the experimental rigour of the natural sciences, it may still be possible to aspire to their neutrality. Even if sociology cannot qualify as a science in the strictest sense, it might still be possible in this way for it to be an objective account of the world. Weber's distinction between being value-free and value-relevant is a helpful one for those who strive to achieve objectivity in their methods. Sociologists' work is value-relevant in that, being only human, mostly, they also have their personal commitments, allegiances and prejudices, and these make some of the issues they study more personally important to them than others. But these feelings and commitments need not, Weber argued they should not, determine their findings. Their work, to that extent, is value-free. They may conceivably be surprised by their results or disappointed about the conclusions their studies lead them to. Of course, truth and objectivity are also values, socially achieved and defended all too rarely and with great difficulty. But they do not necessarily entail any other values. They simply make the pursuit of other values possible.

## 6. Rationalism vs. empiricism

The final dividing line I want to draw amongst the theorists I propose to consider is based on how they envisage a satisfactory explanation. These differences have their modern (that is, as opposed to ancient Greek) philosophical roots in the seventeenth century, in the systematic rationalism of René Descartes (1596–1650) and the empirical philosophy of Francis Bacon (1561–1626). Both were passionately concerned with understanding the phenomenal world, but their conceptions of the place of theory and how it orders observation are radically different. Descartes sought to establish rational thought on logically impregnable foundations. Bacon believed that understanding must be grounded in observation of the real world. (It is said that as an old and sick man, he insisted on getting out of his carriage one wintry day to stuff a dead chicken with snow to see if the refrigeration would preserve it from decay. Unfortunately, as a result, he caught a fatal chill, so one could say he died for his beliefs.)

Rationalist explanation proceeds by logical deduction from first principles. So an adequate explanation of some observation or event would show how it follows as a result of the consistent application of the basic rules of a coherent theoretical system. History is explained when it can be accounted for within a structure of logically related ideas. Thus, for example, the collapse of capitalism can be explained rationally in Marxist terms by our understanding of the contradictions inherent in the system itself, which must inevitably destroy it since, in the last analysis, the law of the accumulation and concentration of capital is clearly incompatible with the persistence of market relations which necessarily requires a distribution of capital.

As we have seen in the case of Bacon, empiricism contrasts with rationalism in that, instead of deriving explanations from already understood principles, empiricism seeks to build its theory upon observation and experience. While the empiricist tradition has been particularly important in the natural sciences, particularly in Britain and America, rationalism has played much the greater role in the European tradition of social thought and philosophy (see Hawthorn, 1976). As Kumar has noted, Francis Bacon '... leads us away from the abstract, ahistorical Platonic concern with "clear and distinct ideas" to the actual technological, social and political accomplishments of modern



societies, and the blessings and headaches they have brought' (Kumar, 1995; and see Rorty, 1985). But while the rationalist perspective has played much the greater role in sociological theorizing from the nineteenth century onwards, empiricism has continued as a less explicit *modus operandi* in the procedures of a great deal of the investigation of specific issues that also goes under the name of sociology. Thus a lot of what one might call 'practical sociology' seems to have but slight connection with the preoccupations of the theoretical literature, and may be subject now and then to derisive comment from those interested in the central issues of contemporary theory. This does not, however, mean – cannot mean – that such work is 'theory free', mere description. It is rather that the theory involved proceeds in a tentative, provisional and piecemeal manner.

When we turn to examine the actual theories which follow, it is endlessly intriguing, if sometimes bewildering, to consider the sheer variety and fecundity of ideas produced by all these people trying to make sense of the changing times they were living through. There is much we can learn from each of them and, perhaps, more still from thinking about how, for all their originality and powerful arguments, they have reached such different conclusions. The diversity of these perspectives illustrates the creativity of the continuing controversy which has come to comprise the sociological tradition and suggests that it is not too late, there is still room for us to join in.

## 2

### Structural Effects: Adam Smith and the Unintended Consequences of Human Action

#### Adam Smith's influence

Some of Adam Smith's (1723–1790) ideas were later incorporated as central elements in the theories of Marx and Durkheim, among others. But it is not just as a precursor whose work profoundly influenced the subsequent development of theory that he is worth our present consideration. His work remains a distinctive response to the dilemmas of theory, an original and still stimulating sociological synthesis of individual action, the critical role of structural relationships, conflict and sympathy. His sensitivity to the psychological, economic, moral and political factors also at work strengthens his claims for the pivotal function of the specifically structural characteristics of a society.

It was already becoming apparent in the eighteenth century that countries where trade and commerce were well developed were beginning to prosper even more than those whose climate, fertile soils, mineral deposits and large populations might seem a richer natural endowment. In these trading nations it was increasingly evident that changes were taking place. The general level of prosperity was rising, populations growing, innovation in manufacturing, changes in manners and beliefs and in the social order of wealth and rank, as well as political ideas and relationships – all were changing as apparently never before. Nowhere was this more obvious than in England, but nowhere was it more keenly observed than in Scotland, England's poorer, smaller neighbour, politically weakened by recent civil war and

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# Continuing Change and Continuing Theory

We have now examined the main theories of structural social change. It is clear that as the phenomenon itself continues, possibly at an accelerating pace, so attempts to explain it or to explore its consequences continue to proliferate. Recent theorists have shown an increasingly self-conscious awareness of the intimate interrelationships between the ideas they propose and the changing cultural context which they claim to articulate. Their view of society as a system of discourse heightens the role they attribute to social theory (and theorists) as constitutive factors and, at the same time, emphasizes theory's vulnerability as an essentially situation-determined form of expression. Earlier theorization had aimed at a more context-free validity, but the mere aspiration to such virtue has come to be questioned. Relativism, however, becomes auto-destructive and present theory gives no pointers to what might be expected in the future, either in substance or of theory.

This study has not been a comprehensive history of sociological thought, and therefore theories and traditions which have not addressed the issue of social change have been omitted. Interactionist theories, ethnomethodology and phenomenological perspectives, for instance, which have mainly been concerned with the minutiae of interaction and questions of identity, action and structure, have not been included. Nor am I aware of any specifically feminist theory of structural social change so that another major element in the recent theoretical literature of sociology has not been included either. Nevertheless, the discussion does suggest the possibility of some wider generalizations about the existing diversity and the further development of sociological theory. Those theories we

have considered do not add up to a cumulative series in which the more recent supersede and improve upon the earlier. The appearance of the various arguments has no doubt been influenced by the historical circumstances in which they were conceived, and this may very well continue to be so. But, for us, they provide a repertoire of ideas and arguments which are all still relevant to our present theoretical needs and interests. It is not like the development of engineering science, in which, antiquarian interest apart, the productive potential, convenience, economy and reliability of the latest products far surpass the crude if ingenious inventions of the early pioneers. The history of social theory is more like the history of music, in which the eighteenth or nineteenth centuries may still offer as much for our inspiration or delight as even the finest work from the twentieth.

Inspiration or delight might be asking a lot, but it would also be misguided to look forward to any general consensus emerging in the future. Old ideas sometimes become fashionable again, new ideas occasionally surface. But there will be no ultimate common agreement because there is no common ground upon which it could be built. Any descriptive account of what is going on is determined not just by what may take place in the external world, but by the basic theoretical, that is, ontological and epistemological assumptions about what is of significance, whether there is a larger pattern to events, whether we are concerned primarily with humanly meaningful reasons for action or with the largely impersonal causes of behaviour, and about what sort of statements, deductive or inductive, logically certain or provisional, would serve to satisfy our curiosity. As we have seen, there are two or more possible answers to all these questions, and no final resolution to any of them. Part of the diversity of social theory is the result of different theorists clatching at different straws in the wind of historical change. Theory has not in the past contained, nor could it ever in the future pursue, some broad convergence of view. On the contrary, arguments about the causes, direction and probable outcomes of change have diverged because each different account has been rooted in the different assumptions from which its authors have set out. That is true of present-day theory and of whatever will replace it.

Current theories of modernity and postmodernity alike

display a preoccupation with the cultural. The modernization theory of Giddens and the postmodernism of Baudrillard are also alike in the role they implicitly attribute to communication technology as generating the cultural effects with which they are primarily concerned. Earlier writers, Smith, the evolutionists or Marx for example, assumed that technological innovation would be part of the strategy of entrepreneurs seeking to make the most of the resources available to them, and other writers, Tönnies, Weber or the systems theorists, saw technological development as part of the wider process of rationalization. There is, that is to say, an implied reductionism in recent theory, which could indicate a pessimism about the possibility of a distinctively sociological analysis were it not for the continuing persuasiveness of those earlier points of view.

These more recent discussions of modernity and postmodernity, however, also share with the evolutionists the sense of a historical discontinuity, resulting from the transition to greater diversity and complexity, on the one hand, or to globalization and hyperreality, on the other. Modernist theorists, however, still want to retain the possibility of a rational understanding of the complex and sometimes contradictory tendencies of contemporary change; postmodernists, for the most part, argue that we are in, or are now entering, a new era which defies rational analysis and that, as a consequence, all those earlier theories that discussed the modernization of the world are no longer relevant. This follows since it is not just that the present cannot be confined within a rational explanation, but that rational analysis itself is a time-bound, class-biased, culturally relativized idea, and therefore, our understanding of the past must be as uncertain and precarious as the stories we make up about our current predicament. Where then does that leave all those attempts to make sense of social change we have just been looking at?

Can we only think about social change in snatched glimpses from within the torrent of events? A cool detachment can be misleading. The complexity, diversity and persistence of the processes of change are not well represented as a transition from A to B, as from, for example, feudalism to capitalism, Fordist to post-Fordist, traditional to modern society, and so on. The changes do not stop once the defining conditions of the B state are fulfilled, and historical inquiry perennially tends

to cast increasing doubt on the purity and coherence of the A state. Binary contrasts do have a heuristic value as pointers. They are, however, misleading when ideal-typifications are taken to be historical reality. All those attempts by social theorists to contrast the society of their own times with what had gone before are flawed by the freeze-frame exclusion of the fluidity of continuing change. Modernity versus postmodernity is the latest of these attempts to capture the dynamic flux of social process within the categories of a (more or less) neat typology. The problem with substantive postmodernism, therefore, is essentially the overly-static conceptualizations from which its arguments derive. Thus the need to distinguish a new postmodern phase of history derives from the rigidities and oversimplifications of theoretical characterizations of the preceding modern phase. These have exaggerated the predominance and stability of some features, such as the nuclear family or class conflict, which were neither universal nor unchanging. Attention has now shifted to other features of the present scene, the role of cultural media or globalizing trends for example, and, in particular, to diversity and discontinuity, which earlier writers tended to ignore in their concern to describe underlying patterns and general trends. Variability and transience may or may not have become more common (Noble, 1998), but they have not replaced those continuities of power and structural constraint that had interested the sociologists of modern times (Gellner, 1992). This new focus of attention, then, is, at most, only partially the result of objective changes in society itself. It reflects, at least as much, the worthwhile realization of some of the limitations of classical theories, on the one hand, while, on the other, it reflects the perennial need of theorists to come up with something new.

There is also a contradiction between the historical claims of substantive postmodernity and what we might call methodological postmodernism, the view that 'the sociology of postmodernization must be a sociology which is itself in transition' (Crook et al., p. 236) or the still more radical argument that what passes for reality is, or has become, only a figment. Like the simplification of history which the contrast of the modern and postmodern eras entails, so the juxtaposition of postmodernist and modernist theory itself oversimplifies and over-dramatizes the theoretical disjuncture. There never was a

single version of modern (pre-postmodern) sociology. Any introductory text will confront the reader with the competing perspectives of differently orientated theorists, Marxists and functionalists, interactionists, conflict and consensus theorists and so forth. On the other hand, the idea that if we are adequately to understand a changing social world, then sociological theory needs to be tentative, provisional, possibly eclectic (e.g., Crook et al., p. 236) is hardly new, but none the less very welcome. But then, we could argue, sociology should always have been like that. The paradox or self-contradiction of postmodernist theorizing should be immediately obvious. If what Lyotard or Baudrillard, for instance, argue is true – then it is true and not just another point of view. But if there is no final truth, only alternative discourses, then postmodernity is just another story with no privileged claim on our belief. There could be no reason why we should agree with it in preference to any other perspective, such as, for instance, the familiar scientific view that there is for all of us one ultimate truth if ever we could contrive to discover what it is. So the idea that life at the end of the twentieth century and beginning of the twenty-first, say, had become more culturally diverse, less structured and so forth, and the contrary kind of scepticism that nothing had fundamentally changed are both alternative ways of looking at the world about us and, for the consistently postmodernist theorists, neither could be established as objectively true. So we have to make up our minds about whether we are either presenting a new kind of sceptical epistemology or looking at something substantively new, the postmodern period of social history. These are separate arguments and neither will justify the other (cf. Featherstone, 1988; Smart, 1990).

By the late 1990s the empty promises of postmodernist theory seemed to attract fewer takers. What then follows in the shape of theory for the new century? What about post-postmodernism? Do we just give up trying to make sense of the changing social world we have somehow to cope with? The requirements of explanation vary with the nature of the problem to be understood (Boudon, 1986, p. 125) and the cognitive context within which it is to be incorporated. In other words, it may be a different matter when making sense of past trends from trying to offer a predictive model or forecast as a possible guide

for policy in the making. The kinds of change we are looking at: long-term or short-term; material, cognitive, normative or institutional; face-to-face, organizational or global may be more easily understood with different kinds of theory. Different models may be helpful if we want to understand the organizational transformation of management in corporate hierarchies, the erosion of interpersonal trust on a deprived urban housing estate, second-wave industrialization in the Pacific rim, postcolonial African religious movements or the globalization of consumer footwear preferences. There is also the reflexive question of why you would want to know about such things. What would it take to make sense of the question, what sort of answers would satisfy your curiosity? The context of beliefs and understanding within which any new investigation has to be located will make some approaches seem appealing, others less so. At the same time, that doesn't mean that any old theory will do. Theories of social change need to take note of the dilemmas addressed by past theorists, their insights as well as their failings, if they are to avoid merely going over well-trodden ground.

The arguments will, and should, continue. In spite of the intellectual pessimism of postmodernists or the intellectual complacency of those who argue that major social transformations are well in the past, and history has come to a stop, the debate will never cease. Even without the inescapability of continuing change in the real world, there is no ultimate theoretical synthesis, no final distillation of a common essence at the heart of every sociological theory. The needs for understanding human society and the possibilities of creative theory are too diverse ever to be confined within any one framework of ideas. Boudon argued that '... it is always possible to find in the real world an inexhaustible supply of examples of processes capable of supporting any theory of social change' (1986, p. 189). That may be going too far. There are better and worse, more and less plausible theories, and we should be able to tell the differences between them. However, the really interesting social theorists have always had distinctive views, usually at odds with prevailing opinions, whether radical or reactionary. Sociology has always been disharmonious and is likely to remain so. We will always have to find our own way about amongst contradictory and irreconcilable perspectives.

The unifying theme here is the essential sociological problem, the issue that gave rise to the subject in the first place and which continues to make it relevant for the world at large outside the lecture room, that is, the causes and consequences of social change. Looking at the range of views which social theorists have offered on this topic, I have recommended no 'best buy', though here and there I have commented on the durability and some of the operating problems of the various models under consideration. Readers who find the question interesting are encouraged to make their own choice or, better, to begin to work out their own arguments, more relevant to these interesting times. But if they can emulate the courage and imagination with which our predecessors tried to explore and explain their changing world, we should be able to look at the sociology of the twenty-first century with some degree of hope.

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